

## **Testimony of Joe Cantu, President, National Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils**

### **Subcommittee on Conservation, Credit, Rural Development and Research**

**June 6, 2001**

Good Afternoon, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, my name is Joe Cantu and I am President of the National Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils. I am one of the thousands of volunteers who serve on RC&D councils across the country. I'm from Pipe Creek, Texas and have been a member of the Alamo RC&D council since 1993. I am here to discuss the resource conservation and development program and how it operates.

The RC&D program began as a pilot USDA effort to address conservation and economic development in rural areas. The Food and Agriculture Act of 1962 authorized the RC&D program. Secretary of Agriculture Orville L. Freeman designated the first 10 RC&D areas in 1964. At that time, the RC&D program focused on multi county geographic areas where major economic and social downturns had occurred. RC&D provided a voluntary, grassroots-driven effort for local residents to plan and work together to solve environmental, economic, and social problems facing their communities.

The Resource Conservation and Development Program is based on a number of concepts that make it a truly unique government program. These concepts include:

- Working toward the goal of community sustainability while achieving a balance between rural economic development and natural resource protection.
- The value of grass-roots involvement in making decisions about local areas.
- Leveraging limited federal dollars with private funds to accomplish goals.
- The value of public/private partnerships in making the best use of limited resources.
- Bringing USDA agencies together to focus on the same problems and opportunities.

An RC&D Area is a multi-county area locally defined, sponsored and directed to carry out a program that encourages land conservation, water management, environmental enhancement, and community development. Each RC&D Area establishes an Area plan, which is a long-term strategic plan that provides direction for the RC&D council in making community improvements and conducting its activities.

RC&D Councils are the centerpiece of the RC&D Areas. RC&D councils are comprised of an Area's sponsors and community leaders who provide grassroots involvement in the program. RC&D Council members are volunteers that include local, civic, appointed, and elected officials. RC&D Councils are non-profit organizations that work in partnership with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service through a

federal coordinator. Because RC&D areas are locally organized, locally sponsored, and locally led, the program provides an ideal way for residents to join together to decide what is best for their community.

When designated by the Secretary, the NRCS provides a coordinator, office space and clerical support to the RC&D council. The coordinator assists the Council in developing and implementing its area plan.

The Council holds community meetings to identify concerns, needs and problems within the Area. The Council then collects information about identified problems. It helps the community prioritize the steps needed to address the technical and financial solutions through a Plan of Work. As a nonprofit entity, the council can also seek needed dollars and leverage those funds with volunteer support and technical assistance.

Councils implement projects and conduct activities that achieve the goals and objectives of their Area plan. Each Council has a process for review and approval of the projects to insure that projects undertaken meet the regions needs. The implementation of a project may include one step or a full range of steps, such as program identification, development of alternatives, plan development, funding and coordination of the project. In most cases, RC&D projects include many worthy community projects that could not be funded directly through either local or state or federal government. RC&D councils see needs in their communities and then look to alternative sources and partnerships to get their activities funded.

The program has grown significantly over the years as a result of its ability to provide local solutions to local challenges. Today, there are 348 RC&D councils covering 80% of the nation and serving over 180 million people. RC&D Councils serve all 50 states, the Caribbean, and the Pacific Basin. There are 27 new applications waiting to be designated. Other areas are in the process of completing their applications for authorization. Our association has adopted the goal of nationwide coverage of RC&D by 2005.

RC&D is unique in its ability to identify and address local problems. We are the catalyst for bringing people together to identify their needs and then we search out funds to solve their problems. Here are a few examples:

The Cherokee Hills RC&D council in Oklahoma was instrumental in the formation of, and continues to provide technical assistance to the Tenkiller Utilities Authority. TUA now represents a coalition of more than 31 cities, towns and water districts, public and private interest and Native American tribal government entities. TUA is a large-scale non-profit organization whose mission is to supply regional water systems with affordable clean water. As result of RC&D assistance, the community is now seeing improved health standards for an underserved population; over 60,000 customers are provided with safe drinking water; uniform water quality and uniform price promote economic opportunities for the region.

Alamo RC&D in Texas received a \$250,000 grant from Koch Industries to bring to code failing septic systems in rural Wilson County. The project will aid 40 rural homeowners and provides 100% financial assistance.

The Big Country RC&D Area in Texas is working on a project to address water quality concerns for over 30,000 people who are dependent on the surface runoff from the watersheds above Oak Creek Reservoir and Lake Trammell as their supply of potable water. Twenty agricultural producers within the project area voluntarily entered into an agreement to carry out Best Management practices through an individual tailored farm/ranch Water Quality Management Plan. Financial incentives to implement best management Practices are available to those agricultural producers participating in the program. Assistance in developing and implementing the Plans is provided through the Nolan County SWCD and the USDA NRCS.

The Glacial Hills RC&D Council in Kansas has a Small Business Development Program, which is designed to increase entrepreneurial activity in the six county RC&D region by helping to start micro enterprises. The program conducts business training and individual technical assistance. The goal is to produce a sound business plan that includes the necessary business planning and analysis that provides a road map for success for the entrepreneur. The program also designs and coordinates a series of monthly seminars that bring new ideas and speakers to the region to support new and existing business. The program has a new initiative, "Sustaining Rural Communities Through Enterprise Development" that provides planning and technical assistance to rural farm families with developing business plans and new enterprises that grow and market alternative crops and products direct to institutions including a local college, hospitals and nursing homes in the region. During the first 3 years the program has been operating 106 people have completed the group business training. A total of 32 new or expanded small businesses have been completed that created 70 new jobs. Data reveals that at least \$2.7 million in annual sales comes from these new startup businesses and the program is being looked at as a model for other areas and organizations.

The ALA-Tom RC&D council in Alabama is very active in a small farmer revitalization effort. The Council has facilitated the formation of four cooperatives and developed basic infrastructure to provide markets for their products. Last year, in spite of a serious drought, one of the cooperatives -- the Selma/Dallas Small Farmers Association made a profit and prevented total crop failures because the RC&D council assisted them with a mulch/irrigation project. The Council has assisted the cooperatives in developing a system so that they can sell their products to the school lunch programs in Alabama and Florida. This effort has improved the quality of life for many minority farm families and stimulated the economy of a rural area.

St. John Aroostock RC&D in Maine recently did a survey of contributions over the years that shows that for each \$1 donated by our sponsors, \$1494 were returned to the area for RC&D projects. In 2000 over \$672,000 were secured for St. John Aroostock RC&D projects. Additionally, 3133 volunteer days were donated in 2000.

RC&D councils are making a difference in America's communities and represent the entrepreneurial spirit of rural America. RC&D Councils have played a strong role in creating new businesses, education, conserving our natural resources, bioenergy

development, and outreach. However much remains to be done in rural America and new issues arise all the time.

For FY2001 the RC&D program is funded at \$42 million. RC&D is administered by NRCS and receives discretionary funding in the annual agriculture appropriations act. Authority exists to provide financial assistance for RC&D projects but due to federal budget limitations, financial assistance has been phased out. Councils must seek funding for their projects and they have leveraged the \$42 million in appropriations into over \$1 billion. USDA studies indicate that the national average cost to support an RC&D area is approximately \$161,000 per designated area. The FY2001 appropriation through USDA/NRCS provides direct support of approximately \$103,000 per council. Currently RC&D councils are underfunded and must do without some of their basic needs for support. Our leveraging ability to assist rural communities could be so much more effective if all RC&D councils and applicant areas were fully funded.

Next, I would like to highlight our farm bill recommendations for you. To continue the good work of RC&D council volunteers to serve our communities and to assist in increasing economic development and conservation in communities that are hard hit by low farm incomes, the National Association of RC&D councils requests the following changes to the law authorizing the RC&D program:

- **Permanent authorization of the RC&D program**

We believe that the recent growth in the RC&D program from 277 councils in 1996 to 348 councils in 2001 covering 80% of the nation and 180 million people is a testament to our success. Congress has recognized the valuable services RC&D councils provide to local communities and has helped to grow this program. In addition, we have successfully leveraged a \$42 million federal investment into more than \$1 billion annually to directly support conservation and economic development, making a continued investment in RC&D a cost effective investment for taxpayers' funds.

- **Update our statement of purpose and write the role of the RC&D council into the law**

This recommendation is a technical change to the law. The original law authorized USDA to work with States, local units of government and non-profit organizations to achieve our mission. The structure of the RC&D councils evolved and USDA recognized RC&D councils as the entity that carried out the mission of resource conservation and development. As a result, we believe RC&D councils need to be recognized in law.

- **Define RC&D council and affiliation of Councils**

This recommendation is a technical change to the law. The designated RC&D councils are the responsible leadership of the RC&D area. RC&D councils and associations of RC&D councils are non-profit entities whose members are volunteers and include local, civic, appointed and elected officials. Affiliations of RC&D councils are formed in states and regions.

- **Encourage USDA agencies to provide technical assistance**

The administrative responsibility for the RC&D program is delegated to NRCS with the expectation that full array of USDA programs and service were available to assist local RC&D councils in achieving their goals. An interagency Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) describes the shared objectives and commitments of the participating USDA Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Policy Advisory Board (PAB) member agencies. Specifically, the PAB member agencies agree to increase coordination and cooperation within the Department to make their programs and expertise more readily available to RC&D Councils and their associations working on behalf of rural areas and communities. The MOU also recognizes that the RC&D Program will serve to further the overall capacity of member agencies to deliver effective and efficient outreach services through RC&D Councils and will facilitate the development of improved linkages among and between field service units within USDA.

The following agencies signed the MOU, Agricultural Research Service, Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, Economic Research Service, Farm Service Agency, Food and Nutrition Service, Forest Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Rural Development, Office of Community Development, Rural Development, and Rural Utilities Service.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, we request that the Farm bill include legislative language that encourages USDA agencies, consistent with their mission and authorities to bolster these relationships. RC&D councils are an effective delivery system for rural America and we see no need to duplicate the RC&D concept to create new programs or entities to deliver services to rural America.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, thank you again for the opportunity to testify here today. I welcome the opportunity to respond to any questions you may have.